

## Life is Better at The Cabin

*Every person needs to take one day away. A day in which one consciously separates the past from the future ... Each of us needs to withdraw from the cares which will not withdraw from us.*

— [Maya Angelou, Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now](#)

Last Thursday at our Book Club meeting, I mentioned that Bonnie and I would be heading up to the cabin in a few days, and one of my colleagues asked, "What is the attraction?" The question caught me a bit by surprise, and I stumbled through something about, "Well, it's a great place to get away." But then I admitted I'm fully retired, so what am I getting away from?

I've thought a bit about the question, and one idea that occurs to be is that environment change is life changing. To a large extent this is the idea behind vacations. Going to another locale, another group of neighbors and friends, even another climate, gives Life a bit of a re-charge, a bit of a jump start and a fresh beginning – yes, each and every time.

We currently have *two* cabins. We didn't want two cabins, but for now, there we are. When I met Bonnie in 2007, she was the proud owner of a 2005 Itasca Navion – a Winnebago Recreational Vehicle (RV) with a Dodge Sprinter chassis and a Mercedes-Benz engine. She loved it. In fact, after our introductory lunch at Mimi's, she took me to see her RV, and demonstrated the slide out – this is not a baseball maneuver, but rather a feature that allows RVs to become larger once you are parked for the night and slide out your bedroom, or whatever. Bonnie had selected the Navion model with no bedroom but with a small dining room table that could be made into a bed (for kids), a couch which could be made into a bed (for me), and an over-the-cab shelf that could be used for a bed (for Bonnie). Bonnie loved it up there, as it was carpeted overhead as well as having a vent window and reading light built in. One morning she awoke and sat up to find herself trapped in bed. She had used those giant Velcro hair curlers, and they had pinned her to the carpeted ceiling!

When we started courting, we would go on RV trips, especially with the Nomads, a subsidiary of the Masons that has monthly excursions within driving range of Albuquerque. One of these was to Pendaries (pronounced in the best French style: PAN-da-ray) RV Park in Rociada, New Mexico, about 30 miles NW of Las Vegas, NM. Soon we learned that some of Bonnie's old motorcycle couple, e.g., Ron and Claudia Weber, and Lela and Damien Lusch, had permanent sites at this park. Damien and Lela had a Park Model, which is essentially a cabin built on the footprint of an RV. These cabins are restricted to no more than 400 sq ft (see: "Tiny Houses" on HGTV) in order to qualify as a vehicle or manufactured home vice a 'standard' home – this results in an annual property tax of only about \$115 and makes owning a Park Model very affordable.

We first made an offer on a Park Model that had a great view of the forest, but had severe annual maintenance requirements – e.g., coating the outside siding with a stain each Spring. It came with numerous ‘amenities’ as many of these vacation homes do – but when we made an offer, rather than accepting it, the owners started slicing off some of the added features. I wasn’t sure we wanted all that maintenance anyway and we ended the negotiations.

Next year [2015], we went up to stay at Pendaries again in Bonnie’s RV during 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend, and heard of a bargain basement price on another Park Model. This one had no view of the forest but did have a huge deck and even a fish pond. We made an offer close to the asking price, and the owners accepted. Considerably less than Matt & Millie’s cabin, plus this one had Hardie Board siding (basically cement and fiber, thus no staining or maintenance). We closed at the end of the month, and became proud owners of our first Park Model.

Our first? Well, the following year [2016], we’re working away on “Goldfish Bay Cabin” when the time comes for Bonnie to send me home on the Southwest Chief for Thursday Book Club. When I return on Saturday, Bonnie meets me at the train station in Las Vegas and suggests we have dinner out. We go to El Rialto and begin by ordering a margarita. We are not good drinkers but often split a margarita on special occasions. This time, though, Bonnie suggests I drink the whole thing – fast. As I recover, she mentions, “Well, Diane Hawkins came down and said we could obtain her cabin for this price – and I accepted.” Suddenly we were owners of two cabins. What to do with GoldFish Bay? Bonnie suggests we keep it to see if folks/friends/family will stay in it; if not, we’ll put it on the market.

One of the many benefits of these Park Models is the low maintenance costs. The RV Park charges a flat annual rate on the order of \$500 which covers the Lot Owners fee, the annual water bill, and trash and sewer service. Hard to beat. All you need to come up with is other utilities (electric, Internet, TV) and insurance (about \$400/year).

Now we are maintaining two cabins. In 2016, as I was scraping away at the paint on the huge deck at Goldfish Bay, I complain to Bonnie, “This is not the way I envisioned my retirement years!” To which Bonnie, with her pragmatic wisdom, replied, “Well, perhaps we’re supposed to – perhaps this is good for us!” So again she won the day.

The transformation that Bonnie has done on both of these cabins is most impressive to me. She has changed out almost all the furniture (they come with a queen sized bed that is built in) and added great deck furniture to The Crow’s Nest (her name for Cabin #2, reflecting the artistic crow platter from Taos plus Helen’s gifted Czechoslovakian crow vase that are proudly displayed here), and recliner chairs and great love seats in each.

When Patti and Dick come for a visit, Patti would ask: "Now, are you going to stay here year round? How many people stay throughout the year?" There are about four couples who do stay year round - for reasons previously noted, the cost of living is very low. However, the temps in Rociada drop way down in the winter - we're talking single digits. Thus we prefer to pack up and head out in late October or early November, to return the following April or May.

To leave, we must winterize the two cabins. This involves draining the water out of the pipes, then forcing compressed air into the system to drive the water remaining out of the joints, then adding the 'pink stuff' (RV antifreeze) into each of the traps. Some people leave the propane heat thermostat set at some low but non-freezing temp such as 40 degrees, but once the pipes are blown out, I prefer to turn off the propane heater. Some folks have Mora Electric pop out the electric meters during the winter, for a charge of \$35 to reinstate, but I prefer to pay the \$25 minimum electric bill to have everything available if we were to come up during the winter. (Bonnie usually comes up on whatever warm day we get in Albuquerque during the winter; the question is whether or not to de-winterize for that short visit.) The satellite TV companies allow us to 'suspend' service for the off-months, and the Internet service is suspended as well.

We have a set of Porch Rules that we attempt to live by; plus we are often working on some cabin project, such as getting pea gravel for the front yard, to scraping and painting the deck at Goldfish Bay. And oh, yes, the fish pond needs to be emptied out, fish captured, cleaned and shop-vac'd, before replacing the water, and, a day later, the fish. In 2017, we thought we had 12 fish to make it through the winter but this Spring, 13 emerged and made it through the clean-up process.

In addition to our Wal-Mart fish, there are numerous natural wildlife affiliates that keep us entertained during our stays. Bonnie's favorite bird is Steller's Jay, a most dramatic creature with wild white eyebrows that has the distinction of being one of the most misspelled bird in the world. Yes, they are stellar to look upon, but they were named for the German naturalist Georg Wilhelm Steller who first described them on an Alaskan island accessed from a Russian boat in 1741.<sup>1</sup> The breeding population is estimated at 2.8 million, with 70% living in the Rocky Mountain range of the United States, between 3,000 and 10,000 feet above sea level. Bonnie likes to lure them with peanuts in the shell left on the railing. We concur with their description:

A generalist forager, Steller's Jays eat insects, seeds, berries, nuts, small animals, eggs, and nestlings. Around people, they also eat garbage, unguarded picnic items, and feeder

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg\\_Wilhelm\\_Steller](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg_Wilhelm_Steller); also commemorated with Steller's sea lion and Steller's Sea-Eagle.

fare such as peanuts, sunflower seeds, and suet. With large nuts such as acorns and pinyon pine seeds, Steller's Jays carry several at a time in their mouth and throat, then bury them one by one as a winter food store. Steller's Jays are opportunists and will steal food from other birds or look for handouts from people.

I love the Steller's Jays, but my favorite is the white-breasted nuthatch. These little guys can run up and down the bark on a pine tree unlike anything else I've seen. They also enjoy our feeders, and their description is also dramatic:

White-breasted Nuthatches are agile birds that creep along trunks and large branches, probing into bark furrows with their straight, pointed bills. Like other nuthatches, they often turn sideways and upside down on vertical surfaces as they forage. They don't lean against their tails the way woodpeckers do.

Life at the cabin reminds me of how much I have to learn about Life everywhere. I never observed Steller's jays or Abert's squirrels<sup>2</sup> before our time up here. And I marveled at how many

'juvenile' nuthatches hung around with my white-breasted nuthatch until I chanced to discover that the little guys are a way separate species: pygmy nuthatches.



A typical day has someone driving by in a golf cart and waving, and perhaps calling out, "There was a bear last night at the bird feeder up at Doug and Judy's in Phase III; it must have wandered by your place as it ended up down at Chris and Frank's."

**Summary:** Crow's Nest is our own *Quinceria*<sup>3</sup>. Life is indeed better, busier, more difficult at the cabin. Come join us - Goldfish Bay awaits you!

<sup>2</sup> recognizable by its tufted ears, gray color, pale underparts and rufous patch on the lower back.

<sup>3</sup> Recommended book by Stephen Bodio on his love of Magdalena, NM and his wife Betsy.